Occupying space across time: from Les Enragés to Los Indignados

Encapsulating Occupation

Words: Prof. Martin Lang

When you occupy– a city square, or a factory, for example–you simultaneously inhabit both space and time. This is a constant and universal property of occupations. The space chosen to occupy usually has symbolic currency. The longer the space is occupied, the more political currency is earned by the occupiers.

The global Occupy movement, because of its cellular, networked nature, was able to simultaneously occupy multiple spaces at the same time. US art historian and political activist Yates McKee (2017, p. 14) refers to Occupy as "an event that involved a historic conjunction of contemporary art and radical politics". He notes that artists were not only integral to the movement (as activists); they influenced it aesthetically so that non-artist activists became concerned with aesthetics, performance and poetry. He claims that:

"LES ENRAGÉS WAS A TERM APPLIED TO FAR-LEFT AGITATORS DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION"

Art and artists were essential to the core of the movement itself as initiators and organizers, rather than secondary decorators adding their work onto a social movement that could have otherwise existed without them. (2017, p. 17)

Occupy might have been "a historic conjuncture" of art and protest, but it was not the first. Indeed, artists have played key roles in occupations for at least the last 50 years. In the UK perhaps the most famous example is the artist-occupation of Hornsey Art School in 1968. Copycat sit-ins occurred at several other UK art schools in sympathy and solidarity. In the same year, the Situationist International (SI) famously played a key role in the occupation of the Sorbonne and the Nanterre universities in Paris. Situationist graffiti, slogans and posters became icons of what turned into a global May '68. As with Occupy in September 2011, the spirit of May '68 ushered in simultaneous occupations across a multitude of spaces across the globe. The SI was part of an avant-garde tradition that aimed to merge art and life. Such avant-garde artists did not merely illustrate occupations: they were also key organisers. They laid the foundations for new forms of political art and the aesthetically infused Occupy movement.

From Les Enragés to Los Indignados

At the time of the 1968 occupations, the Situationist René Viénet published *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement*. It is striking that the French word *enragés* is in some ways reminiscent of the Spanish word *indignados* (*enragés* and *indignados*: the outraged and the indignant). Could the etymologies of these words reveal links between two occupation movements from very different times and space? The etymology of 'indignant' contains a moral element. It literally translates from the Latin as 'not worthy'. This is consistent with the contemporary Spanish usage, since the Indignados movement regarded themselves as having been unfairly treated (they were 'not worthy' of their maltreatment). The term might be associated with being aggrieved, angry and resentful. Indignant in French is *indigné*, but it could also be translated as *outré*. This etymology can be traced to the Latin term *ultra*, meaning beyond, but the term has clearly evolved since then, through the Old French term *ou(l)trage* into English. 'Outrage' retains something of the Latin if it is considered to refer to crossing (beyond) a reasonable boundary. There is therefore a spatial element to the term: when somebody crosses a reasonable line (committing an outrage) you might feel indignant (that they have treated you unfairly). Feelings of indignation and outrage may have subtly different meanings, but in contemporary usage they are hardly a million miles apart: they appear as synonyms on the word processor used to type this essay, for example. Both the Enragés of 1968 and the Indignados of the early 21st century felt enraged (or indignant) towards the ruling elites and the political system.

Les Enragés was a term applied to far-left agitators during the French Revolution; it was also applied to the left-wing agitators in Parisian universities in the build-up to 1968 that induced "demonstrations, expulsions, and then several days of street fighting (in which all the French situationists [took] part)" (Knabb 2011). In fact, the *Enragés* formed "during a struggle against police presence in Nanterre preceding the unrest in Paris" (Viénet 2014).

The Indignados movement was born in reaction to the high unemployment, economic crisis and heavy cuts resulting from the global banking crisis of 2008. It started by using social networking and other online platforms to facilitate large numbers of participants: somewhere between 6 and 8.5 million Spaniards are estimated to have taken part in its demonstrations (RTVE 2011). They called themselves 'Los Indignados' after Stéphane Hessel's book *Time for Outrage!*, which was translated into Spanish as *¡Indignados!* (Gerbaudo 2011).

Clearly, there are historical and geographical differences between the beginnings of these two movements, but there is evidence to support a claim that both were born from outrage. Slavoj Žižek (2012), David Harvey (2012) and Alain Badiou (2012) have all written that accumulations of rage can be seen in Occupy and the riots and the Arab Spring that came before. This builds on Peter Sloterdijk's theory of 'rage banks' (2010). Rage is stored, as if in a bank where it accumulates interest to be later 'withdrawn' for payback. The metaphor is clear: rage is a form of capital, but what and where is this bank? Sloterdijk posits the church and

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Communist Party as two examples where suffering invested in the present will supposedly be rewarded in the future (afterlife or revolution). This might apply to 1968, but it seems less likely in 2011, given the relative dwindling of both institutions. It is more likely that the bank from which the Indignados and the Occupy movement withdrew their rage capital was capitalism itself. Indeed, writing during Occupy, sociologist John Holloway (2012) asserted that the movement was an expression of rage against the rule of money. Since 1968 (and even more so since 1989) people had invested their rage into the capitalist dream of one day getting rich, spurred on by promises that hard work pays off and that, as Margaret Thatcher famously pronounced, there is no alternative anyway. Once the banks collapsed in 2008 the illusion was destroyed. What followed can be categorised in three ways. Firstly, there was denial. This is exemplified in the United States where banks were allowed to fail. This position denies that there is anything wrong with the system. Secondly, there is shock. This is exemplified by Britain's response, where the banks were bailed out. This position acknowledges that some (temporary) state intervention is necessary to correct the system, which after taking its medicine will recover (a shock to the system is needed). The third category of response was that of the eventual protestors: the conclusion that it was time to withdraw their rage capital, occupy and begin to imagine structural alternatives.

What began as a curiosity about an etymological link between the words *enragés* and *indignados* turns out to have some substance, but is it fair to draw parallels between two movements from such different times? Ken Knabb (2011) does just this in his article "The Situationists and the Occupation Movements: 1968/2011". Although he does not refer directly to the Indignados, it should be clear that they were part of the occupations of 2011. Before Occupy existed, the Indignados (copying the model of the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo) had occupied Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona and Syntagma Square in Athens. Solidarity occupations followed across the globe. Furthermore, McKee (2016) has noted that in New York City in the days before Occupy Wall Street there was a "regular presence of Spaniards" who had "recently arrived from the M15 [AKA Indignados] movement in Madrid". When Knabb refers to Occupy, the Indignados stand in the background. So, when he claims that the Occupy movement was inspired by the Enragés and their role in the 1968 occupation of the Sorbonne, it can be inferred that the Indignados were also informed by the Enragés. For example, the Indignados established

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a series of popular assemblies that have been referred to as the beating heart of the movement (Gerbaudo 2011). The assemblies of the Indignados and Occupy movements recall Knabb's description of how Situationists in 1968 invited others to join them in a democratic general assembly to address problems and come up with solutions (2011). While the Indignados did not occupy a university, their defacement of advertising and the political graffiti echoed the spirit and tactics of May 1968.

So then, there are links between the occupations of 1968 and those of 2011, despite their taking place in very different times and places. Both occupations were born from rage against the rule of money, although this rage had been invested in different banks. This rage-investment had matured over time and was withdrawn at a specific time and space–what Badiou would call an 'evental site'. There is one last aspect of time and space in art and protest that will require more time and space to unpack. What happens when artists and activists spend prolonged periods of time together in confined spaces?

He Who Fights Monsters

He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you. (Nietzsche 2003, p. 102)

In *Bitter Lake* (2015), Adam Curtis argued that the Soviet Union thought it was civilising a backward country, but it did not pause to think how Afghanistan would influence the USSR. As the Soviets encountered bribery, corruption, profiteering and drugs, they found that these diseases were "more contagious than hepatitis". Similarly, could it be the case that artists who aim to influence occupations by aestheticising them (as with the examples of 1968 and 2011) are opening the door to unforeseen influence? Answers can be found in two major art events that are widely acknowledged to have been heavily influenced by the global Occupy movement: dOCUMENTA 13 and the 7th Berlin Biennale.

According to Sebastian Loewe (2015, p. 186) writing in *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, dOCUMENTA 13 was generally better received than the 7th Berlin Biennale. This also seems to be the position of curators and art historians Maja and Reuben Fowkes (2012), although they are critical of both. They saw both biennales as part of a "stream of major art events referencing the Occupy phenomenon both by borrowing its open-source concepts and seeking direct collaborations with social activists" (2012, p. 12). This is what they call the "Occupy effect on contemporary art".

dOCUMENTA 13 (Kassel, Germany 2012) embraced the prevalent political zeitgeist with gusto. When some activists turned up and occupied the museum lawn, architect Alexander Beck erected 28 white tents next to the Occupy site. Worried that this expansion of the occupation might result in their eviction, the protesters declared themselves to be part of a 'total artwork', recalling Joseph Beuys' maxim that 'everybody is an artist' and his socially-engaged entry to dOCUMENTA *7000 Oaks* (1982). Indeed, dOCUMENTA 13 might be a case of life merging with art, since gallery-goers would be hard-pressed to tell where the real camp ended and its art facsimile began–although the lived-in campsite looked shabby and chaotic compared with the sterile, minimalist and tidy art installation. The occupiers even went as far as to declare themselves the evolution of Occupy (Loewe 2015, p. 192). Was this an evolution, or a retreat from their evicted symbolic sites, to the safe space of the gallery? The lack of institutional critique is noteworthy. Detractors might point out how this kind of occupation

"THE ACTIVISTS ON DISPLAY CREATED A BIZARRE KIND OF HUMAN ZOO, AS VISITORS WATCHED THE SPECTACLE OF ENCLOSED ACTIVISM"

turns up at an art event, a site with no symbolic value to their protest, only to establish a monastic camp where it is possible to avoid engaging with the one per cent *and* the global art market. However, according to Loewe (2015, p. 195), "the activists in Kassel kept holding onto their idea that positioning themselves in the context of the art world would add strength to the movement".

Writing for *Art Monthly*, Maja and Reuben Fowkes (2012, p. 11) reported that the art camp created a "semiotic spectacle" that mimicked the "clean and orderly aesthetics of museum modernism". The artistic director, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, welcomed this 'docuppy' movement in Friedrichsplatz, asserting that it conformed to the spirit of Beuys. She also urged the protesters to take care of the square and be considerate to the residents of Kassel. So, here were protesters declaring their actions to be art and a curator happy to recuperate (to use the Situationist term) their protest–so long as it didn't cause too much trouble.

Loewe (2015, pp. 191-192) notes that the real occupations had "economic and political grievances which they believed should be eliminated. Therefore, they symbolically squatted some of the spaces most associated with their protest", while the occupiers at dOCUMENTA (and other art exhibitions) had a different goal: to "promote and advertise the protest" by becoming part of the art world. One might say they used the site for political networking. The first part of this essay describes artists entering and influencing sites of political protest. Now we can see that political protest entered sites of artistic dissemination. Whether this recuperation of protest did much to bolster the radical credentials of the dOCUMENTA or the Occupy movement is debatable. However, according to the Fowkeses (2012, p. 12), it was "illustrative of wider reactions to the Occupy phenomenon in contemporary art".

The 7th Berlin Biennale, entitled *Forget Fear*, also occurred in Germany in 2012. The Biennale grabbed headlines for dedicating its main open space of the KW Institute of Contemporary Art to the members of Occupy Berlin, Occupy Museums New York and members of the Indignados movement, as well as other anti-austerity protestors. Activists were invited to use the space for discussion and planning: once more a reciprocal arrangement between artists and activists regarding the use of each other's spaces. Loewe (2015, p. 196) gives a more sympathetic appraisal than most when he points out that the activists in Berlin, instead of declaring themselves to be an artwork (as the occupiers did in Kassel), considered their role to be a political operation: they primarily wanted to "advertise the Occupy movement, win over new supporters and followers, and connect with activists internationally". In this sense, rather than being recuperated, the activists were the ones exploiting the gallery space for its cultural capital. They needed a roof and a platform, and the Biennale provided both with an audience to boot.

However, the fact that the activists were on display created a bizarre kind of human zoo, as visitors watched the spectacle of enclosed activism. Audiences were bound to observe from the viewing platforms, rather than join in. It is always difficult to approach a group as an outsider; it is even harder when they appear to be performers. If the activists wanted participation, there were other ways they could have set themselves up. Instead, audiences waited for something to happen.

The activists might not have planned to become an artwork, but that is what happened. Chief curator Artur Żmijewski even declared that it was an artwork because it complied to the criteria of Beuys' social sculpture (Loewe 2015, pp. 197-198).

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"NAKED ADULTS PLAY THE CHILDREN'S GAME OF TAG IN A FORMER NAZI GAS CHAMBER"

The Biennale was an example of the curator-star rising above the artists. In fact, Żmijewski is an artist and the whole Biennale might be seen as his artwork. The installation of a protest camp might be read as a readymade. Żmijewski also selected his own artwork for the Biennale, using his position to include a film previously banned in Germany. *Berek (Game of Tag)* (1999) features naked adults playing the children's game of tag in a former Nazi gas chamber. It was removed from the exhibition *Side by Side: Poland - Germany. 1000 Years of Art and History* (Martin-Gropius-Bau Museum, Berlin 2011-12) because of perceived insensitivity towards Holocaust victims and survivors. Żmijewski wasted no time re-introducing the work to a Berlin audience.

Once you consider the biennale as Żmijewski's artwork, you notice the orchestration of every tiny detail. He even *détourned* the press conference, turning it into a mock general assembly, complete with hand signals and human microphone (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2012, p. 13). These techniques were developed during Occupy to encourage more horizontalist organisational structures, but here Żmijewski is the puppetmaster. When the activists realised how they were being used, they challenged the Biennale to adopt the horizontalist structures it apparently endorsed. They called for the establishment of working groups to decide on all budgetary and programming decisions and demanded that the curators be referred to as 'former curators'. "The neo-Maoist implications of such a radical transformation of biennale management", the Fowkeses worried, "could herald the end of the art system as we know it" (2012, p. 13).

The effect of the political entering artistic space (the biennale circuit) should not be underestimated: protest itself was used as a kind of readymade and activist methodologies were, at the very least, considered as curatorial strategies. The reader might feel that the so-called Occupy effect on contemporary art is overstated, focussing on only two biennales both in Germany and both in 2012. However, McKee (2017, p. 16) has noted that:

There has been so much art centered around the Occupy experience that it is, even this early on, possible to ask whether we are seeing the emergence of an Occupy 'style'– a tangible artistic movement in response to this major political event in American life that could upset the world of white-walled galleries.

US curator Nato Thompson (2012, p. 31) could have been describing Żmijewski's curation of the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012) when he wrote of a growing sense of misgiving regarding the global biennale circuit:

Artists who espoused supposed political ambition and content seemed to simply travel the world trading in the symbolic culture of activism. To quote the artist, anarchist, and activist Josh MacPhee, 'I am tired of artists fetishizing activist culture and showing it to the world as though it were their invention'.

In the same year as these two biennales Thompson published *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. In it, he warned that "as art enters life, one must consider the powerful role that affect plays in the production of meaning" (2012, p. 32). Thompson appears to predict the Occupy effect on art that the Fowkeses described above, and the more recent post-truth phenomenon. He recognises that cultural production is based on affect–engaging with how things make you feel, rather than how they make you think–and he calls for an analysis of how such artworks function on political and social levels.

For Thompson, biennales are unlikely venues for successful political art. He interprets Michel de Certeau's terms, the 'tactical' and the 'strategic', to mean temporary (interventionist forms of trespass: tactical) and long-term (strategic investment in space). He singles out art biennales as being tactical, as they trade in the symbolic culture of activism without engaging with it in a long-term and meaningful way. It can therefore be deduced that 'occupy art' in biennales is ineffective because of time:

the inclusion of an Occupy camp in a biennale remains a temporary invasion into the aesthetic realm. Thompson's assessment (2012, p. 31) demonstrates that such a tactical nature and a lack of concrete political goals coupled with the limitations of showing within the gallery system are at times inseparable:

By being discreet and short-lived, the works often reflected a convenient tendency for quick consumption and exclusivity that garnered favor among museums and galleries.

Thompson makes a convincing point. Occupy has influenced art, for sure. Its open-source concepts and direct collaborations with social activists, although perhaps not unprecedented, have now become established parts of the art activist toolkit. This makes a distinct break with the previous dominant art discourses. Many postmodern and YBA artists (Warhol, Koons and Hirst are the most obvious examples) embraced the free market and, as such, are implicated in the financial collapse. Relational artists accepted that the system could not be changed, so they attempted to retreat from its reach to form convivial 'micro-utopias' (Bourriaud 2002, p. 33). Postmodern notions of active and passive reading and the interpretive role of the reader/audience (that date back at least as far as Allan Kaprow's Happenings) are but a distant echo of the kinds of activist collaboration in the wake of Occupy that for Paul Mason (2012) includes "graffiti, the graphic novels, light shows, street theatre, posters and figurative paintings associated with the Occupy movement". We might also add to Mason's list art activism, craftivism and that a revised *détournement* can be seen in memes, culture jamming and its associated subsets (brandalism, subvertising and so on).

It is important to recognise that many of these kinds of occupy art exist outside the gallery and biennale circuit. This withdrawal from the gallery system (which dates to the historical avant-gardes: Futurism, Dada, Surrealism), combined with collaboration with activists is a positive contribution to artistic possibility. The Occupy effect on art is not exclusively positive, however. The examples of the Berlin Biennale and dOCUMENTA were troubled, rather than enhanced, by their association with Occupy. In seeking the alternative stage of the art world to voice its concerns about globalisation, corporatism (and the erosion of democracy this implies) and neoliberal capitalism, Occupy revealed a truth about the art world: that it is very much part of the neoliberal free market economy. As such, on a systemic level, its primary function is not to promote a message (to collaborate with Occupy), but to recuperate the radical potential of protest as a new form of capital. This includes the assimilation of radical activist methods into curatorial approaches that are worryingly described above as 'neo-Maoist' by the Fowkeses. If these methods were applied universally, the result would surely be bland design by committee, where the artist is demoted beneath the curatorial 'committee'. The danger here is that curators will increasingly select politically correct art that is democratic in its provenance, curation and theorisation, excluding anything with individual expression as hierarchical. Curators, biennales and galleries have a huge effect on art, perhaps more now than ever. They will influence future artists' choices and art made outside the gallery system is prone to co-option. This is a potential danger for art, but not for the art system as a whole. Before Occupy, Mark Fisher (2009, p. 9) noted that "nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV". Writing in Occupy's immediate wake, Brian Holmes (2012, p. 75) indicated that nothing sells quite like activism in a sterile white cube accompanied by revolution for sale in the bookshop on the way out.

An argument has been made that the kinds of biennale art described in this essay are troubled by their association with protest. Conversely, it could be argued that the concerns listed above only inhibit new kinds of art from emerging: that we are witnessing something new. For example, art historians such as Grant Kester (and curators and theorists like Nato Thompson, as seen above) call for activist art to be unmoored from traditional notions of aesthetics, which they see as limiting for radical art. Their position is commensurate with the avant-garde call to merge art and life. It is fine to privilege politics over aesthetics, but the merging of the two in biennales did not enhance the protest politically. The protest camp was removed from its symbolically occupied site, declawed and recuperated into the biennale circuit where it remained focussed on external matters and divorced from institutional critique. By recuperating protest, institutions also made artworks timeless. In other words, the effect was to remove the political from both its (symbolic) space and time.

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